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Mainstreaming CT: Lessons from Times Square

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Amidst the ongoing inquiries into the failed Times Square bombing on 1 May, one lesson which can already be distilled is the necessity of 'mainstreaming' counter-terrorism.

THE 1st of MAY appeared to be a typical Saturday evening in Times Square, New York. The place was bustling with restaurant-goers, theatre-goers, and tourists all going about their usual weekend leisure activities. Lance Orton and Duane Jackson, veteran street vendors in Times Square, were also going about their usual business selling souvenirs and crafts. That particular evening, however, they noticed something unusual amidst the crowd at about 6:34 pm : an empty Nissan Pathfinder SUV parked on 45th Street near Broadway with its engine left running, making strange "popping" noises with suspicious smoke being emitted.

Foiled Bomb Attack

Reminded of the nightmare of 9/11, Orton and Jackson immediately alerted a police officer nearby. Within 15 minutes, police officers and bomb squad personnel had reacted by evacuating the area and then ascertained that the SUV contained an improvised bomb. Thereafter, the explosive device was successfully dismantled and the SUV was removed from the scene. Within a few hours, it was business as usual for Times Square, as if nothing had happened. New York City's Mayor, Michael Bloomberg, praised the response and cautioned that "We avoided what could have been a very deadly event".

In the follow-up investigations, detectives swiftly traced the SUV to a Pakistani-American named Faisal Shahzad, and arrested him on 3 May at JFK Airport as he attempted to board a plane for Dubai. It appears that Shahzad, who was naturalised as an American citizen only about a year ago on 17 April 2009, may have received some training in explosives during his previous visits to Pakistan. His immediate links to a known terrorist organisation however remain uncertain at the moment.

Importance of “Mainstreaming Counter-Terrorism”

The 1 May Times Square incident demonstrates the critical difference an average citizen(s) can make in successfully averting a terrorist attack. Therefore, counter-terrorism should not be regarded as being the sole and exclusive domain of the government but rather has to be ‘mainstreamed’. *Mainstreaming CT* basically refers to bringing in not only the government officials, but also the community and the public to engage in CT efforts. The objective is to develop CT gradually into a cultural norm in a society. While this may well be easier said than done, in the long term, such a cultural norm may well prove to be the difference between success and failure in averting a major terrorist event.

While the fight against terrorism is mainly led by specialist CT agencies, it would be unrealistic to expect them to be at the forefront every time and everywhere. In free societies where civil liberties guarantee rights such as freedom of movement, gaps would inevitably exist for a determined terrorist mind to exploit. For example, the mass transportation networks of modern cities, so economically vital, cannot subject all its users to 100 percent checks. Thus, the odds would always seem to be stacked against the CT agencies. This reality brings to mind the chilling warning of the Irish Republican Army in 1984 to the effect that terrorist only need to be lucky once, but the law enforcement agencies have to be lucky always. Thus, mainstreaming CT should not be regarded as mere academic theory but rather an important practical necessity in which every law abiding person has a role to play.

Of course, the intention is not for a nation to become a society of snitches and spies. What is being advocated is that the average citizen be informed, aware and alert, but not paranoid and easily alarmed. Jackson and Orton, both Vietnam War veterans, did not possess any special CT training, yet it was their vigilance and alertness that prevented a catastrophe. Another example of an average Joe playing a significant CT role can be found in the failed Christmas Day airline bombing incident. When Jasper Schuringa noticed smoke rising on fellow passenger Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab on Northwest Flight 253, he immediately sprang to action and successfully tackled the Nigerian down before he could ignite the bomb hidden in his underpants. It is noteworthy that Schuringa was not a trained air-marshall but rather an ordinary passenger on the flight. These examples demonstrate that while the citizenry is usually the target of a terrorist attack, the average citizen himself/herself is an invaluable resource which can be cultivated as an effective tool of CT.

Policy Imperative

In short, *mainstreaming CT* is no longer just a catchy maxim but a policy imperative. In this connection, in his opening address at the recently concluded Asia-Pacific Programme for Senior National Security Officers, organised by the Rajaratnam School’s Centre of Excellence for National Security, Senior Minister and Co-ordinating Minister for National Security Professor S Jayakumar recognised the importance of mainstreaming CT. He noted that a 2009 survey showed that although most Singaporeans are aware of the government’s efforts to enhance national security, only half of them were prepared to deal with actual terrorist attacks in the future. As such, he stressed the need for the general public to be cultivated in respect of their roles in enhancing national security in times of both pre-crisis and post-crisis.

Lessons from Times Square

The lessons that can be drawn from the Times Square incident are exportable to all societies involved in the CT effort. It must be recognised that Citizen Joe is not a mere bystander but has a role to play in the CT effort. The Times Square incident is a perfect example of how government, community, and the public can act in concert in combating terrorism. Had it not been for the keen observation of street

vendors and security agencies' swift and professional response to the alert raised, the Times Square bombing incident could have been the next catastrophe for New York. Instead, remarkably, normalcy returned within a few hours. All in all, the Times Square incident showcased the virtues of a whole-of-society vigilance in the face of the ever-evolving terrorist threat.

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